

California Officials Urge Vietnam's President to Release Prisoners, Respect Universal Rights

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (D-CA), U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and U.S. Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) today sent a letter to Vietnam President Nguyen Minh Triet urging him to release and dismiss charges against two prominent Vietnamese activists. Both Pham Thanh Nghien and Tran Khai Thanh Thuy are being detained for calling on Vietnam to respect fundamental human rights. Both are facing significant prison sentences for their activism and are expected to go on trial in the next few weeks.

"Today, members of the California delegation called on the Government of Vietnam to show its respect for free speech and expression by releasing two human rights activists who are being detained for exercising those rights," said Rep. Sanchez. "Vietnam will never gain the respect of the international community or its own people until it improves its abysmal human rights record. We are offering the government an opportunity to do so, by dropping the sham charges against Pham Thanh Nghien, Tran Khai Thanh Thuy, and other activists."

A copy of the letter, which was released earlier today, can be found below:

His Excellency Nguyen Minh Triet

President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

c/o Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

1233 20 Street NW, Suite 400

Washington, DC 20036

Dear President Triet:

We are writing to convey our serious concern regarding the detention and upcoming trials of Ms. Pham Thanh Nghien and Ms. Tran Khai Thanh Thuy, two prominent human rights activists. We request that the Vietnamese government act in a manner consistent with its own legal obligations and international law, and release these individuals immediately and without prejudice.

Based on information from the U.S. Department of State and international human rights organizations, it appears that the charges against Ms. Pham Thanh Nghien and Ms. Tran Khai Thanh Thuy are seriously flawed. Both women have consistently championed human rights in Vietnam, including freedom of expression and association. For those activities, they are now facing possible prison sentences.

Our understanding is that Ms. Pham Thanh Nghien is scheduled to go on trial this Friday, January 29, 2010 for "propagandizing against the state." She was reportedly arrested by Vietnamese security officials in September 2008 and we have been told that her family has not been allowed to visit her in prison since her arrest.

We understand that writer and activist Ms. Tran Khai Thanh Thuy, who attempted to attend the trials of other democracy activists, is facing trial on February 5, 2010. She has reportedly had no contact with her family since her detention in October 2009. In addition, there has been no confirmation that medications supplied to the police to treat her diabetes and tuberculosis have been delivered.

According to the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Vietnam is a party, all citizens enjoy freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right of association. Both your Constitution and the ICCPR also guarantee criminal defendants the presumption of innocence, the right to present a defense and the right to counsel. The imminent trials of Ms. Pham Thanh Nghien and Ms. Tran Khai Thanh Thuy appear to starkly contradict these principles.

We therefore respectfully request that the Vietnamese government immediately and unconditionally release Ms. Pham Thanh Nghien and Ms. Tran Khai Thanh Thuy and that while in detention, authorities take all measures to guarantee their physical and psychological security and well being, including access to medication and independent medical assistance and visits from family and friends.

Universal rights must be upheld for all people. It is time for Vietnam to allow its citizens to fully exercise the internationally recognized rights of freedom of assembly, expression, association and religion without fear of retribution from their government.

We thank you in advance for your assistance with this important and time sensitive matter.

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